

WANDER
GAMING AND THE JOY OF DISCOVERY

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INTEGRATIVE PROJECT THESIS
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Wander began in my CFC II section as an inquiry into this possible future of video games and their peripheral culture. This first iteration of the project resulted in a series of digital paintings, but the concept behind them was still unfinished. The idea for the game stuck with me, and I'm continuing the project through my IP. In its current state, it is a concept book that addresses the experiences of spending time in nature as the focus of a game. The book outlines all the results of this year of conceptual and visual development: it includes digital paintings and other imagery, as well as a written description of its core concepts: exploration, curiosity, freedom, relaxation, survival, and whatever else the player feels about the great outdoors.

My inspiration for this project comes in no small part from the time I've spent with nature. I spent my early childhood on Mackinac Island, a small island in northern Michigan, which is about 75% State Park. Being a kid and having 2500 acres of well-protected



woods to run around was invigorating, and an early inspiration for my love of nature. I've also had the opportunity to spend time at a summer camp in Ontario, taking two weeks every summer to canoe and backpack through Canadian wilderness. On top of both of these, I've spent the last four years working for a landscaping/gardening company, where I've been building my relationship with my surroundings, and engaging directly with nature (or at least elements of it).

These are my most valued experiences of my life, and they have shaped my personality and work in regard to nature, but they've always coexisted with my fondness for more digital spaces, especially video games. Around age five or six, I got my first game console, a Nintendo 64 with two Zelda titles, Star Fox, Mario Kart, Banjo Kazooie, and a few other standards. I immediately fell in love with games, although at that age, I just thought they were cool and fun. I've grown up with video games, been around for a significant portion of their time on this planet, and I've watched the industry evolve and become more culturally and artistically significant than just an entertaining niche pastime.

These two interests of mine don't often cross paths, as you might guess, but while they are different, they're not mutually exclusive. My creative interest sits at the intersection between them – more specifically, I'm interested in using games to make nature and its positive effects accessible to people who might not have the opportunity or physical ability to engage in the outdoors. Not everybody gets to grow up with a State Park in their backyard, so I want to bring that feeling of adventure and connection to a larger audience. Nature can provide us with an infinite variety of feelings that are uniquely personal, and sometimes indescribable. I'm interested in this variety of emotional states: the feeling of curiosity and exploration, the feeling of isolation and peace, the feeling of immersion in nature and oneness with the earth, the feeling of freedom and complete personal agency, and many others.

This experiential focus of my interests and work has led me to many fine artists as well, like Ryoji Ikeda, James Turrell, Walter De Maria, and Yayoi Kusama. These artists all create spaces for their viewers to interact with and feel on their own terms. Kusama, Turrell, and De Maria each create sculptural installations, unique and powerful spaces using light,



stone, mirrors, and other viscerally charged materials that interact differently with every viewer's emotions. For instance, De Maria's *Time/Timeless/No Time*, pictured above, instills in me many feelings at once: reflective, peaceful, ominous, mysterious, melancholy, hyperaware, meditative, and maybe more. But each person who sees it experiences something unique and personal. Ikeda's light and sound installations work similarly in that they betray very little in the way of a message or theme – rather, they are experiments with their media, an uncanny experience for their viewers and listeners, who in some cases become part of the work themselves, standing on a projected light piece.

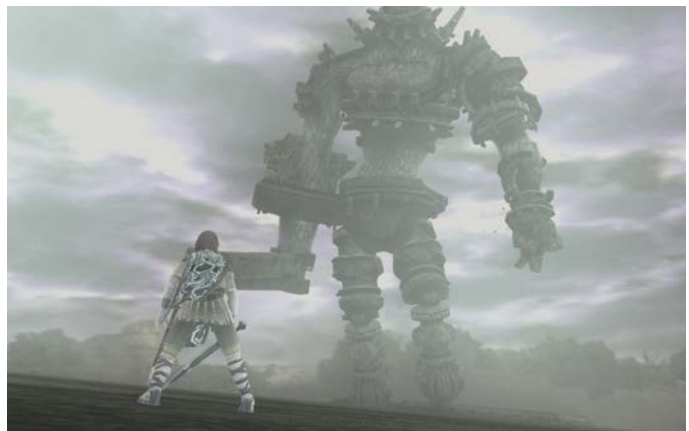


Some games have already touched on these feelings to a certain extent. For instance, in *Mountain*, players' own feelings about nature are reflected in their experience. Minimal interactivity forces players to just think and feel, to enjoy their mountain's presence, and to question what it means to be a game, or even to be interactive. Occasionally the mountain, which is unique and procedurally generated, will posit randomly generated questions and comments (some relaxing, some philosophical, some kind of scary), but mostly it just spins around, and that's really about all that happens. *Mountain* shows that games are quickly

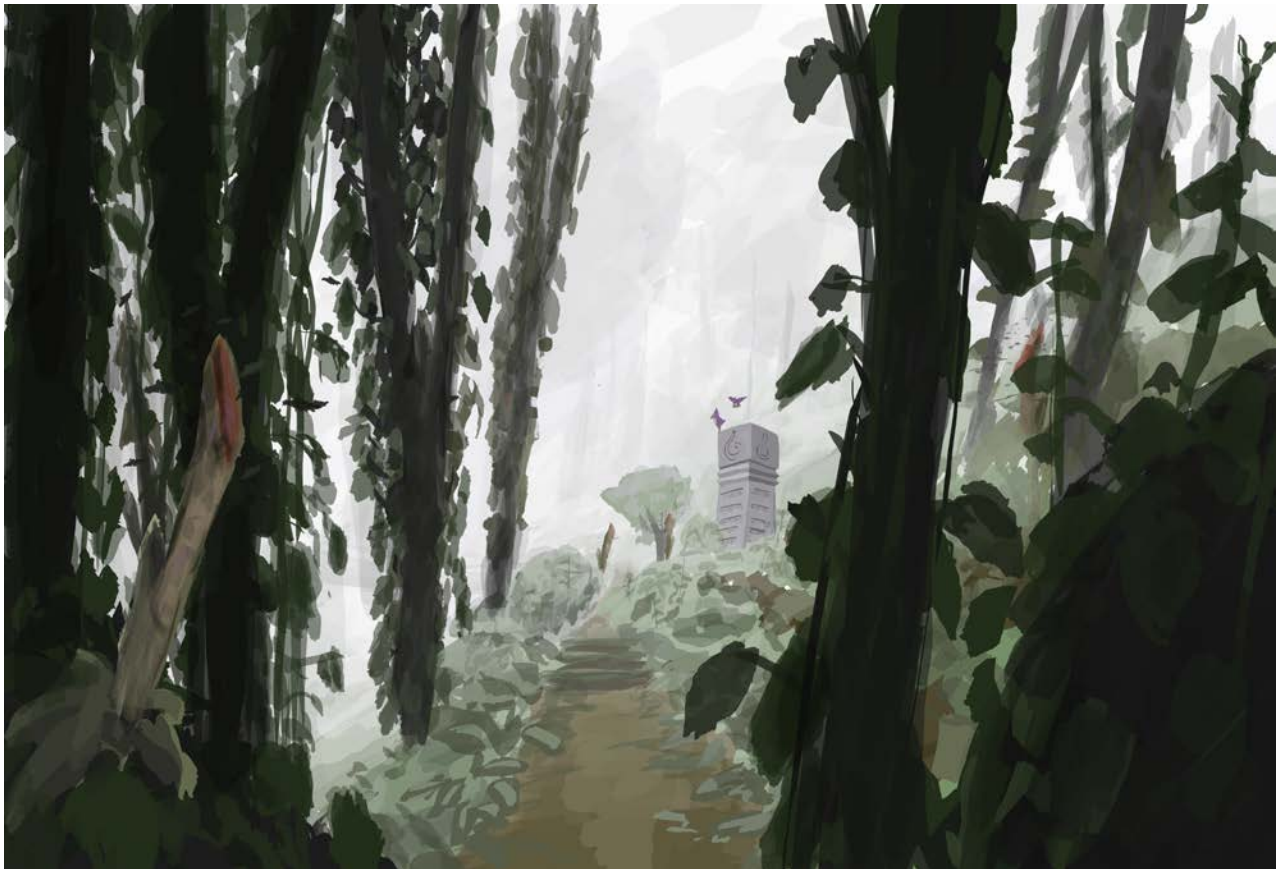
becoming a medium for making brand new, unique experiences that are closely tied to ones found in real life, right alongside what we think of as “games” in the more rigid, literal sense (think *Monopoly*, *Angry Birds*, basketball, etc.).



Many examples sit right in the middle on the scale between experiential and gameplay-heavy games. *Fez* is a great example of this – it is focused on novel platform-jumping and puzzle-based gameplay, but the environment and sound design contribute to a peaceful atmosphere and encourage players to explore and learn about their surroundings, to take plenty of time to stop and smell the flowers, to thoroughly examine relationships between parts of the game, and enjoy the time they get to spend in the world. This experience is much richer and more rewarding than simply trying to zoom through the environments and accomplish its goals quickly. Other games like *Shadow of the Colossus* use exciting gameplay and narrative to confront players with their relationship



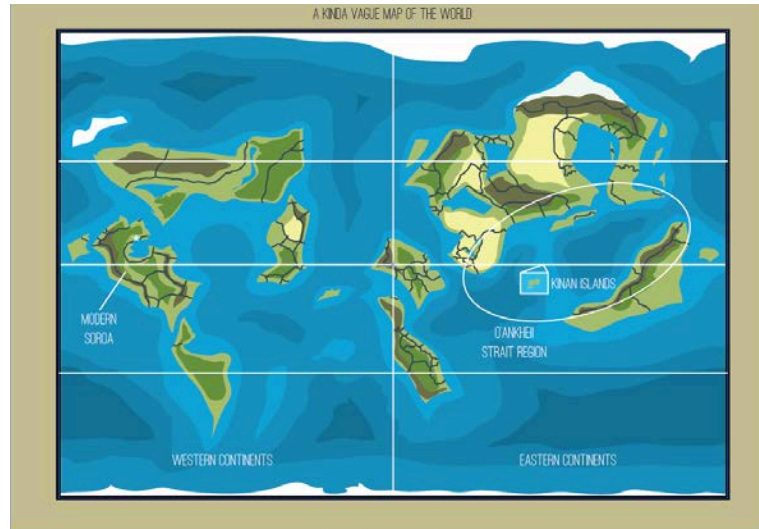
with nature. This game's main draw is its grand fights with ancient creatures made of earth and stone. Mindful players will experience grief and sadness over their character's selfish actions against these beings who seemingly act as representatives or guardians of the land in which they live. The strength of these games, in comparison to other media like film or painting, is interaction – they give players almost complete agency over their experience with their surroundings, and have room for players to interact with and experience fictional environments and worlds.



The premise of my game follows in the footsteps of these nature-focused games. *Wander* has no goals, narrative, or scripted events, allowing its players to interact with its setting in basically whatever way they see fit. Players begin the game by sailing to an uncharted, deserted chain of islands, and the rest is basically up to them. Instead of a story, the environment is the focus of this project – it functions as the player's motivation as well as the source of all of their possible actions, rather than a backdrop for action or narrative. The emphasis of this game is on interaction with nature and history – exciting things like

sailing, exploring ruins, and cave diving, as well as relaxing activities like chilling on the beach, reading ancient books, looking for cool flora and fauna, or just hiking through the jungle and making maps.

This open-ended format has remained the same from the start, the setting has changed considerably since the beginning of the project. Originally, *Wander* would be set on an island in the Pacific, probably during the 17th century, but after some research, it felt better to make the environment fictional, and to



build a world that would be more interesting to explore and learn about. This new world is based closely on ours, with politics and timelines that mirror and comment on our own world. I do enjoy the pirate-y low-technology vibe of the 17th century (which I am still using), but that era of exploring was a direct product of European colonialist practices, which I do not support, and do not wish to glorify or participate in. Putting players in the boots of an explorer during that time period felt wrong, and didn't fit the content of the game. The fictional history of the game speaks to this, and centers around the disappearance of the islands' people, as a result of colonialism and xenophobia.

In developing the history, I made sure to consider more parts of the world than just these islands. Other civilizations that would have interacted with them also have their own



histories and cultures, informed by real life, and throughout *Wander*, players will have opportunities to learn about them through art and literature that remains on the islands. The islands' culture was influenced by several real-world civilizations, but it isn't a heavy-handed

reimagining of any one group; rather, it was inspired by various populations from around the Pacific ocean – Polynesian, Japanese, Mayan, as well as some more typically western peoples like the classical Greek and ancient Egyptian cultures. The culture of these islands is in some ways indicative of how I think of my own connection to the earth – it is focused on the islanders’ great reverence for nature, and their understanding of their place in it. Their structures are often integrated with the land and provide homes for flora and fauna, and their spirituality revolves around elegant personifications of the forces of the earth.

All this being said, I deliberately withheld much of this background information in the book though, providing mostly a framework for understanding the experience and the setting – the world-building portion of the development served to make the imagery and text of the book more cohesive, but the purpose of the book wasn’t necessarily to convey it. Giving away big parts of the background narrative would sort of defeat the purpose of the game, although it is frustrating to be unable to properly show the depth of the world until the final product is made.

With that in mind, I intended more to inspire curiosity and excitement through the concept imagery, and reinforce the idea of an immersive personal experience and atypical game mechanics. The images showcase the wide variety of biomes and environments found on the islands, and often include bits and pieces of the islands’ visual culture, while the text outlines some of the game’s mechanics and emphasizes that the experience will be realistic and immersive, as close to a real trip to the



outdoors as it can get. This feeling of a realistic wilderness sabbatical is the main focus of the game, so the book mostly focuses on that. It was also important for me to include imagery of a diverse range of people as well, to reinforce the idea that there’s no

“main character” other than the player’s completely customizable avatar. Concept art and development focusing on a pre-made (usually white male) character is a common trend in the industry, even in games with similar character creation. *Mass Effect’s* Commander Shepard is a perfect example – even though the player can be male or female, of any race, all of the promotional art for this game features a white dude. I want this game to be accessible and kind to a diverse audience, to be a safe and accommodating space that represents people of every race and gender, and I tried to emulate that within the book’s imagery and text – there are no gendered pronouns, and no identifiable main design for the player character, allowing readers and future players to feel like it really is them in the character’s shoes, rather than that they are following or puppet-ing around some pre-written stranger.



Many aspects like this are very much in response to recurring tropes in the immature gaming industry, as well as the problematic community that surrounds it. Over the past decade, the public face of gaming has evolved from a relatively peaceful niche group of nerds and young people to a mob of screaming, misogynistic man-children. A lot of these horrible gamers are members of that same group of peaceful nerds, but they’re mad that their boys’ club is being “invaded” and “desecrated,” made “politically correct” or whatever. It’s juvenile and frustrating, but people like this are what the industry has become, and they have quite a bit of influence. Men make up only half of the gaming population (men like that, an even smaller portion), but popular, big-budget games are for the most part made *by men for men*, and they tend to reflect their developers’ contempt for the non-male portion of their audience in ways that range from silly to nauseating to completely heinous. *Wander* is not for any of these people, frankly, and I hope it frustrates them.



Issues in the gaming community are a huge part of the groundwork for how I approach my artistic practice, and they're important in how I view games and think about myself in relation to them. My biggest influence in this respect is Anita Sarkeesian – her Feminist Frequency project (a blog and video series dedicated to encouraging critical thought about women's relationship to video games) has played a big part in both my worldview and my artistic process, especially in regards to accessibility and representation. Part of my intention with *Wander* is to contribute to a change in the industry and community surrounding video games – to add to a growing list of developers who tired of their community's refusal to grow up and accept constructive criticism, and to breathe some fresh air into a medium that's quickly becoming stagnant.

At its core, *Wander* comes from my desire to explore and be in tune with the world around me, despite my urban setting. I want to make games that allow their audience to take part in some of the exciting and meaningful interactions that I've had with nature. A chance to get away from the modern world and go exploring, without having to spend money on gear and travel. A chance to see what it might be like to have those kinds of experiences in real life. My hope is to inspire my audience to go out and foster their own connection with our world, and to use games like *Wander* as ways to bring that appreciation back home with them.